

John Casey
NEMLA Talk
April 6, 2014

Depicting Gettysburg in Evelyn Scott's *The Wave*.

Abstract:

Often praised for the “cinematic” and “modern” technique of her work, Tennessee native Evelyn Scott uncovered a powerful metaphor for describing the United States Civil War in her 1929 novel *The Wave*. Beginning with the first cannon fire at Fort Sumter, Scott traces the ripples of war through a dizzying variety of locations and characters. Her work is both psychologically deep while at the same time epic in scope. One series of vignettes from her panorama of war involves the supposedly climactic Battle of Gettysburg. In chapters 8 and 9, she paints a picture of the battlefield through the psychological responses of civilians watching the war unfold on their doorstep and soldiers caught up in the confusion of the fray. What her narrative sketches reveal is the surprising ordinariness of Gettysburg as the author places this “high water mark” of the war into a larger social and historical context that is worldwide in scope. Scott’s now largely forgotten narrative thus stands as a precursor to the current Global South studies movement and the concomitant effort of U.S. Civil War scholars to examine the war from an international perspective. Her writings deserve greater scholarly attention as an early effort to shift literary representations of both the U.S. South and the Civil War away from the exceptionalist narratives associated with them.

[Handout provided to audience with photos of Evelyn Scott, biographical information, and selected quotes related to *The Wave*.]

PAPER

Part I: The Lost Modernist

The publications of Evelyn Scott (1893-1963) have for a long time sat at the edge of the literary canon. Consequently, among the handful of scholars who have studied Scott's fiction, the recurring image of "the Lost Modernist" is often associated with her life and writings.

Scott's most recent biographer, Mary White, notes that: "The historical record clearly shows that Scott, throughout her career, had the attention and esteem of her fellow critics and authors" (White, 1). Nonetheless, White goes on to state, "most scholars of American literature have either no knowledge of or no opinion about her work" (5).

White attributes this critical neglect to a number of factors. Among them are the "physical and emotional problems" that Scott suffered throughout her life (4). Suspected by both of her biographers (Mary White and D.A. Callard) of having a personality disorder, Scott struggled with alcohol and drug addiction throughout her tumultuous life and attempted suicide on a number of occasions. She also suffered from medical complications associated with the birth of her first and only child, Creighton Scott (a.k.a. Jig), who was the product of Scott's disastrous romance with a much older, married man, Frederick Creighton Wellman. These numerous difficulties may have led to the labelling of the author as a crackpot and emotional rollercoaster, effecting future publication and sales of her work, much of which remains (in spite of the efforts of Second Wave feminist critics) out of print.

These personal problems alone, however, are not enough to explain the obscurity of Evelyn Scott and her literary creations. Many other Modernist authors were just as difficult and troubled as Scott. But they were men and she was a woman. Gender, therefore, must be considered as a factor for her relative obscurity in comparison to her "Lost Generation" Modernist contemporaries. This explanation fueled the efforts of feminist scholars in the late 1970's and throughout the 1980's as they attempted to edit and publish new editions of Evelyn Scott's fiction and nonfiction writings.

Scott's rambling lifestyle also played a role in her marginal status in southern literary history. Born Elsie Dunn in Clarksville, TN, she moved with her family first to St. Louis, MO and then to New Orleans, LA as her father attempted to restore his financial situation. It was in the Crescent City that Elsie met Frederick Wellman and eloped with him, ending up eventually in Brazil with a husband, baby, and a new name--Evelyn Scott. These peregrinations were simply the first of her many moves about the globe. Scott's early biographer D.A. Callard quips that "This very American novel [i.e. *The Wave*] was written in the south of France, a Portuguese hotel, an Algerian oasis town, the Hollywood Hotel in Montreal and sundry points in between" (Callard, 113). Compared to William Faulkner, whose work and life remained

rooted in one place for most of his life, Scott must have seemed to many only tangentially southern.

Any one of these problems on its own would have been enough to affect Scott's literary legacy. However, the author's experimental writing style was an even greater obstacle to her long term popularity. Scott's commitment to innovation in style often meant that no two books would read the same. Her unpredictable shifts in characterization, plot development, and setting forced readers to start fresh with each book they purchased. This limited the commercial appeal of her works and made her more dependent on a small group of readers (many of them fellow authors) who were gradually alienated by her difficult personality. Style, which made Scott's fiction unique, was thus also ultimately its downfall.

Part II: "A Novel of Compelling Fragments"

To fully understand the relationship between Scott's difficult literary style and her status as a "Lost Modernist," one need look no farther than her only best-selling novel--*The Wave* (1929).

Feminist critic Lucinda MacKethan refers to *The Wave* as "a novel of compelling fragments" (MacKethan, "The Waste Land Women of *The Wave*," 116). Peggy Bach views the narrative as "applying the method of the cinema" and, in the process, creating a "variation of the panoramic technique" (Bach, 98).

Fragmentary yet panoramic and an experimental precursor to the more conventional best-seller *Gone With the Wind* (1936)--this seems to be the almost universal judgment held by the small number of critics to have analyzed the novel.

Peggy Bach warns readers that: "In preparation for reading *The Wave*, two things should be avoided--an expectation that a design or pattern of relationships will emerge, and a search beneath the surface for hidden symbolism. It is the expectation that such a pattern will evolve that causes some readers to weary of the novel's length, the seeming repetition, the sense that one thing is merely being added to another....." (102).

In place of the character development readers are accustomed to in novels and the elaborate plotlines associated with the venerable sub-genre of the historical romance, Evelyn Scott gives us a concept explored over 625 pages.

That concept is best explained by Scott herself who stated that "War itself is the only hero of the book. Whatever the philosophy of an actor in a war, he must constantly be convinced of his feebleness when attempting to move in an emotional direction contrary to that of the mass. The propulsion of the individual by a power that is not accountable to reason is very obviously like the action of a wave" (qtd. in Bach, 97).

"The action of a wave" provides both the title and the conceptual framework for Scott's

fragmentary tale of the U.S. Civil War. Caught up in the vast social movement unleashed at Fort Sumter, characters are propelled in and out of a novel whose only structure is the chronology of the war with which Scott assumed her early twentieth-century readers would be familiar.

Part III: Fragments of Gettysburg

In order to fully appreciate the novel, one must (as Bach suggests) dive in to the text and appreciate its fragments. Today I intend to do just that, focusing on a cluster of vignettes associated with the Battle of Gettysburg.

Fought over the course of three hot summer days in July of 1863, Gettysburg has taken on an hyper-mythic status at the center of a war understood in largely mythic terms. We might justly call it the ur-battle of the war.

Although many writers of both fiction and nonfiction have captured the hyper-mythic qualities of this battle, southern novelist William Faulkner perhaps put it best in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) when he stated:

For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin...This time. Maybe this time with all this much to lose than all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble... (Faulkner, 190-91).

Evelyn Scott uses the reader's pre-existing knowledge of this battle and its hyper-mythic qualities (noted above) as her starting point in chapter 8 of *The Wave*. This helps her to build suspense as readers anticipate the action soon to follow.

She begins the chapter with excerpts from two newspapers--*The Richmond Appeal* and *The London Guardian*. The first of these excerpts laments the lack of information on the whereabouts of General Lee's Army of Virginia, but concludes that "while it is hard for the people of the South to labour under their present anxieties, they must admit that the old adage which says that no news is good news was never more apt" (Scott, 236). In the second excerpt, the foreign press also laments the lack of dependable news from the battlefields, saying "war news from the United States of America is infrequent and independendable" but that rumors indicate General Lee to be on the offensive (237). The London press then goes on

to note the economic impact of the U.S. Civil War on the British people who face “the miseries resulting from financial ruin” due to the Union naval blockade of southern cotton deliveries to Europe (237). *The Guardian* then shifts to news of local interest such as the Marquis of Hasting’s efforts to end cock-fighting, the death of a millinery worker named Mary Anne Walker that is being discussed in the House of Lords, and a grand ball held by the Prince and Princess of Wales.

Scott provides no date for either excerpt, making it difficult to track down these stories to a real source. Nonetheless, these clippings serve their purpose. Readers are left to imagine what it would have been like in late June and early July of 1863 to not know the location of Lee’s army, and, consequently, where the next battle will occur.

This lack of information heightens the surprise of citizens in the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg when they learn that the Confederate army is only a few hours march away.

Mrs. Drew and her daughter Sally are trying to stay cool on a stifling afternoon in July. The mother is in the process of removing her corset while the young girl peers out of the window at the dusty street in front of her house. Rumor has spread that southern troops are moving north towards the state capitol.

Soon that rumor is confirmed by the presence of Union soldiers passing through town and the arrival of Mrs. Drew’s gossipy neighbor, Mrs. Harris, as well as a one-legged man named Mr. Hach, who seems to be a person of importance in the town. The man looks sternly upon the group of women and says “I want you ladies to git right indoors. No time for talk or anything. There’s gonta be trouble as sure as I’m alive, and if you stand around out here, you’re gonta regret it. Git down in the cellar. And if I was you, Mrs. Drew, I wouldn’t stop for to collect none of my family heirlooms” (241).

Mr. Hach hobbles off at great speed following his pronouncement to the ladies, presumably to warn other citizens of the town. Soon everyone, including Mrs. Drew and her daughter, disappears indoors, leaving the streets of Gettysburg deserted. As she awaits with her mother the advance of the southern army, Sally is described as both “frightened” and “elated” since “nothing ever did happen” in the sleepy town of Gettysburg (243).

From this scene of civilian anticipation about the battle about to commence, Scott shifts abruptly to the perspective of soldiers involved in the conflict. Here she follows the stylistic lead of Stephen Crane in narrating the interior thoughts and feelings of four Union soldiers. The first is a courier sent to warn General Meade of the Confederate attack on General Buford’s cavalry during the first day of battle at Gettysburg. Following this sketch, the author shifts to the perspective of two men in Wadsworth’s Division who are fighting the Confederate advance on the second day of the battle. One is an enlisted man, known only by his first name, Johnny, the second is an officer named General Acre who is anxious to die in his saddle rather than of old age and he eventually gets his wish. The final Union soldier depicted in this

narrative cluster is again only known by his first name, Jerry. We see him in retreat with his unit to regroup in “the old cemetery” (253).

The narrative then shifts back to the civilian perspective of the battle. Betsy and her three children are huddled in their house. We are told that “There was no cellar in the house. Betsy did not know where to hide the children” (254). She can see the Union soldiers fleeing through the town and hear the artillery shells exploding not far from where they are hidden. We can feel the mother’s terror as she clutches her children close to her, praying that the war comes no closer than it already has. Her daughter Martha shouts out “I can’t stand it, I can’t stand it, Ma. You must make it stop” (255).

Betsy attempts to comfort her daughter as the two boys, Everett and Matthew, move over towards a window. Everett shouts out “There’s a man in the yard, Ma. A man ran through the gate. There’s another man after him” (256).

The mother is in anguish wondering if “she [was] making a mistake to remain here” as “the house was all windows.” But, she wondered, “where else could they go?” (256).

Just then they hear a sound: “Pling, pling, pling, Bloom” (256). The youngest boy, Matthew, looks out the window. Suddenly he runs to his mother and then off into a dark corner of the house. He throws up.

Asking the older boy what he has done to his younger brother, Everett sheepishly replies “I didn’t mean to scare him, Ma. There’s a dead man in the yard. He fell on his face, and he looked so funny” (257). The mother is furious but at the same time relieved, the soldiers are gone. The narrator tells us that: “If it were not for the presence of the dead man, life might begin again” (258).

Scott now shifts back to the perspective of soldiers during the battle in her next scene as we see Jay Smith, a private in Birney’s Division (Union army), who is bayoneted while advancing on the Confederate line.

After this short scene we again return to the civilian perspective of the second day of battle. A young girl named Mary Murdock runs outside look at “the enemy” while her parents remain inside the house praying. The narrator tells us that “Hay’s brigade of ‘Louisiana Tigers’ was assembling in a rear street, and through the interstices in the limp palings, she could just make out bits of men’s faces, portions of the gaudy Zouave uniforms” (260). Sally can’t restrain her curiosity and pulls herself up to the top of the fence to look out into the street. “She realized that she was blushing,” we are told, “but she would not glance away, though they counted every freckle on her sunburned face. These were *the enemy*.” (Scott’s Emphasis, 260).

With her hands stinging from holding on to the top of the fence rails and her head scorched by

the sun, Mary, nonetheless continues to scrutinize these apparitions from another world. She can't "overcome the sense of something oddly festal in this occasion" (261). Nor can she let the enemy "stare her 'down'" as "she was as good a patriot as any" (261). Yet at the same time she feels a stirring indignation at the invaders of her hometown Mary also feels a strange emotion coming to life inside her. She wonders if the enemy soldiers "considered her immodest" and feels an ache in her "small breasts, squeezed against the palings" (261). As the soldiers prepare to march off, she sees a "tall man with...blond moustaches...and haggard cheeks" who returns her gaze. Mary feels "an almost certain sense that they had recognized each other," but cannot remember where they had met (262). A sense of "fear" and "exultance" courses through Mary as the man marches away. We are told that she "hated these exciting times to end" (262).

Her nascent sexual desires are soon interrupted by her mother who calls her back into the house. There Mary can hear her parents praying along with the distant sound of the guns. Drawn back into the context created for her by her parents, Mary thinks to herself "She didn't *want* the Second Coming--never, never, never--when *He* would appear. It was foolish, when that was something in the Bible, but she was afraid of *Him*. What *was* the Second Coming?" (Scott's emphasis, 263).

The author leaves us to ponder what Mary might "want" and what those wants signify, shifting the reader's attention back to the battlefield. This time it is the third day and the preparations for Pickett's charge have begun.

Contrary to what we might expect, Scott imagines the moments before this famous infantry charge through the eyes of an immigrant, an English subject from Trinidad named Northcliffe, who is now serving as a lieutenant in Pickett's Division. The narrative hints at the long standing and complex relationship between Northcliffe and a Creole private in the same unit, named René Blanchard. These unlikely comrades now find themselves in another strange escapade, fighting for a cause that neither fully believes in, primarily in the hope that it will improve their social standing after the war.

The narrative shows these unlikely soldiers preparing to advance and then shifts to a more conventional frame. We see Pickett appearing before General Longstreet for approval to begin his advance and Longstreet's reluctance to give that order (hoping Pickett will express his reservations about a frontal assault on the entrenched Union line), but we only see this scene for a moment. Soon the narrative returns to the perspective of Northcliffe and Blanchard who we see as small pieces of the larger Confederate advance. Northcliffe's fate remains unknown to readers at the end of this sketch but we do see Blanchard fall during the charge, his last words being "O Sainte Marie, Sainte Vierge des vierges, let me leave dis sufferin' quick" (274).

In the next scene, the narrative moves on to the aftermath of Gettysburg. The final sketch of chapter 8 involves a newspaperman known only by his last name--Myers. Myers is a writer for

The New York Banner. He had become entangled in the Confederate retreat while trying to observe the tactics of General Lee's army. Now we see him trying to make his way back to Union lines so that he can file his story as "he had just had the good fortune to behold an 'unforgettable' battle" (275).

The hapless journalist sees the southern cause as gallant but doomed since "slavery was a relic of barbarism" (276). His thoughts wander as his feet stumble about the edges of the battlefield. Myers sees Gettysburg as "the end of the South's military ascendancy" (278). History has happened before his eyes but he must first make it to a telegraph before he can share his thoughts with his readers.

Soon it starts to rain, lessening the July heat but soaking Myers to the skin. The storm intensifies and he can see lightning strike a tree off in the distance. The reporter searches for shelter. Finding a cave, he crawls inside to wait out the storm but soon feels the "awareness of some disquieting presence" (281). He can hear a "snuffling" noise in the cave and peering into the darkness Myers sees a sleeping bear. Equally terrified of both the bear and the lighting, Myers chooses to run out into the storm. "No matter how he got there," we are told, "he was determined to arrive at Gettysburg before the night set in" (282). Furthermore we are told that "he had been through a 'real experience'" and "his urge was to escape an unexpected and awful loneliness" (282).

The narrative context makes the "real experience" mentioned in the passage above seem ambiguous. Is the Battle of Gettysburg being referred to or Myer's narrow escape from the bear. Either association seems possible. It is only later on that same page that this ambiguity is partially resolved. Myer's thinks to himself: "They aren't afraid enough. That's what's the matter with these crazy militarists and fire-eaters. They're too dull to understand fear. And this seemed to him, peculiarly, a last wisdom. It was almost as if he had been vouchsafed a revelation" (282). The journalist's near fatal encounter with a bear is interpreted by him as a factor qualifying the greatness of the battle he has just witnessed. With or without a war, nature can easily take a life just as quick as a bullet or bayonet.

Chapter 9 is much shorter than the one preceding it and contains several loosely connected vignettes that illustrate disparate responses to the aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg. The first is the imagined sales pitch of a newsboy trying to sell an Extra edition of a newspaper covering the story of Lee's defeat at Gettysburg. In the second, we see the wounded Confederates slowly retreating South, focused more on their intense thirst and bodily pain than thoughts about the battle they have survived. The final series of sketches sends readers to Brazil, England, and Germany. In these three different cultures, we see the international response to the U.S. Civil War in July of 1863. This varies from the excitement of Brazilian businessman Dom Manoel who has made a considerable profit from "buying up cotton" before the onset of the war and the gratitude of Elizabeth that "the war in American had done such damage to the tobacco trade" that her beloved Adolphe might return home to Germany to the desperation of the English textile worker Giles who leaves his wife Jennie and their children

because of the closure of the mills and his inability to provide for them (288, 290).

The last word in this series of sketches is reserved, however, for a wounded private who “swore profusely, cursing everybody, cursing nobody” but heaping his greatest disgust on the war that has nearly cost him his life (292).

Part IV: Scott’s Role in the Literary History of the U.S. Civil War

What becomes abundantly clear through this brief summary of the Gettysburg section in *The Wave* is the cumulative effect of Scott’s narration style upon the reader. One quickly becomes confused and overwhelmed by the vast array of people, settings, and events that are flashed before them and then just as quickly disappear.

War becomes (as Scott intended) the only “hero” (or more fittingly anti-hero) in the novel and its wanton destruction rather than the ennobling qualities of a “just war” becomes the lesson this disembodied protagonist provides.

The presence of this lesson marks Scott’s narrative as a Modernist text, inspired as much by the senseless slaughter of World War One as it is by memories of the U.S. Civil War. This feat alone should secure her a place in the male dominated field of war literature, particularly that produced by the “Lost Generation.”

However, her work also serves as a useful counterpoint to the more successful writing of the popular author Margaret Mitchell in *Gone With the Wind* and the novels of William Faulkner that helped define the early twentieth-century literary movement referred to as the “southern renaissance.”

Sarah Gardiner notes, “*The Wave* received generally favorable reviews from national magazines [but Margaret] Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* eclipsed Scott’s novel in popularity and sales, setting the mark for those tales of the Civil War that followed” (Gardiner, 213).

The appeal of Mitchell’s novel was twofold. First it provided a main character (Scarlett O’Hara) for readers to follow throughout the events and settings of the novel. This helped readers to construct a logical connection between sections of the novel much better than a historical chronology illustrated by loosely connected vignettes. Second, Margaret Mitchell’s novel (as Gardiner suggests) adapted the existing southern mythology about the war rather than tossing it out the window. As an Irish immigrant, Scarlett is not the ideal southern heroine but her life follows the plantation ideal to the letter. In many respects, it is (as Gardiner argues) the swan song for this form of narrative. All later attempts are viewed through the lens of this work.

Faulkner’s fiction could not have been more different from Mitchell’s popular writing. Yet, like Mitchell, he was rooted to a specific region in a way that Evelyn Scott was not. His

particular “postage stamp of soil” was the indirect and sometimes direct subject of his fiction, which could be just as fractured in terms of narrative as Scott’s. This was particularly true of his early novel *The Sound and the Fury*, which Evelyn Scott helped to promote before Faulkner had become famous.

Shut out of the Modernist canon of war literature most likely due to male control of the genre (particularly the control of veterans) and that of southern literature due to her cosmopolitanism, Evelyn Scott’s *The Wave* is a text trapped between existing literary traditions.

It is only now as we begin to shift our understanding of the literary history of the United States that her fate as a semi-canonical author might be changed. *The Wave* illustrates in the 1920s a form of Global South studies, more common today than it was in her time, that places the war and the region defined by that war into an international context.

She also reminds us that all wars depend upon a sense of group identity to motivate combatants, but that these “imagined communities” are frequently destroyed by the war.

As Wade Newhouse notes, “With at best a delusional sense of past and no chance for a resolved future, the national ontology represented in Scott’s characters can develop and grow only in the affiliation between their incomplete narrative and the work of the reader who struggles to reconcile it with a mythology that it does not resemble” (Newhouse, 581).

The U.S. Civil War is presented in *The Wave* as at the same time much less and much more than the inheritors of its legacy (North and South) once supposed. It is a shock to the imagined community of the United States that at the time Scott’s novel was published remained unresolved and (to a certain extent) remains unresolved today.

Works Cited:

Bach, Peggy. “*The Wave: Evelyn Scott’s Civil War.*” *Classics of Civil War Fiction*. Eds. David Madden and Peggy Bach. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 2001. 97, 98, 102. Print.

Callard, D.A. *Pretty Good For a Woman: The Enigmas of Evelyn Scott*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1985. 113. Print.

Faulkner, William. *Intruder in the Dust*. New York: Vintage, 1991. 190-91. Print.

Gardner, Sarah. *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women’s Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004. 213. Print.

MacKeathen, Lucinda. "Daughters of the Confederacy: Southern Civil War Fictions and *The Wave*." *Evelyn Scott: Recovering a Lost Modernist*. Eds. Dorothy Scura and Paul Jones. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2001. Print.

----- "The Waste Land Women of *The Wave*." *Southern Mothers: Fact and Fictions in Southern Women's Writing*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1999. 116. Print.

Newhouse, Wade. "Trapped Echoes: *The Wave* and the Collapse of National Community." *Mississippi Quarterly*. 59 (3-4): 581. Print.

Scott, Evelyn. *The Wave*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1996. 236, 237, 241, 243, 253, 254, 255, 256, 257, 258, 260, 261, 262, 263, 274, 275, 278, 281, 282, 288, 290, 292. Print.

White, Mary Wheeling. *Fighting the Current: The Life and Work of Evelyn Scott*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1998. 1, 4, 5. Print.